

Ladies and Gentlemen I would like to welcome you to the unveiling of the latest mural by the East Belfast Historical and Cultural Society. The Society takes great pride in ours and your history and culture; we believe it is a history and a culture of which we can be extremely proud. We also believe that we as in all who are present tonight have a duty to ensure that that our children and our children's children are made aware of just where we as a people have come from. All in this room do it in their own way and that is what we must continue to do.

The Society in this venture decided to remember two aspects of our history and our culture;

1. Our industrial heritage and in particular that of one of the most famous shipyards of the world Harland and Wolff, and
2. The fact that for many, many years as a community we have provided thousands upon thousands of recruits for the armed forces and in this case the Royal Navy.

Let's take the yard first;

Harland and Wolff was formed in 1861 by Edward James Harland and Hamburg-born Gustav Wilhelm Wolff. In 1858 Harland, then general manager, bought the small shipyard on Queen's Island from his employer Robert Hickson. After buying Hickson's shipyard, Harland made his assistant Wolff a partner in the company.

Thomas Andrews became the managing director and head of development in 1907. It was during this period at the start of that century that the company built the RMS Olympic and her sister-ships RMS Titanic and RMS Britannic. These were three of over 70 ships constructed for the White Star Line by the company, the last being the Britannic in 1929.

## **THE WAR YEARS**

During World War I, Harland and Wolff built many war ships with the cruiser HMS Glorious being the best known. In between the wars the company started an aircraft manufacturing subsidiary with Short Brothers, called **Short and Harland Limited** in 1936. Its first order was for 189 Handley Page Hereford bombers built under license from Handley Page for the Royal

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Air Force. During the Second World War, this factory built Stirling bombers as the Hereford was removed from service.

The Second World War saw the shipyard build 6 aircraft carriers, 2 cruisers (including HMS Belfast) and 131 other naval ships; and repairing over 22,000 vessels. It also manufactured tanks and artillery components. It was during this period that the company's workforce peaked at around 35,000 people. Along with other parts of Belfast the shipyard was heavily bombed by the Luftwaffe on two occasions April and May 1941 causing considerable loss of life and severely damaged the shipbuilding facilities as well as destroying the aircraft factory.

### **POST-WAR PERIOD AND DECLINE**

Following the war the demand for cruise liners diminished as travel by air literally took off. This coupled with competition from Japan, led to difficulties for the British shipbuilding industry. The last liner that the company built was the SS Canberra in 1960.

In the 1960s, notable achievements for the yard included the tanker Myrina which was the first supertanker built in the UK, and the largest vessel ever launched down a slipway (September 1967). In the same period the yard also built the semisubmersible drilling rig Sea Quest which, due to its three-legged design, was launched down three parallel slipways. This was a first and only time this was ever done.

In the mid-1960s, the British government started advancing loans and subsidies to British shipyards to preserve jobs. Some of this money was used to finance the modernisation of the yard, allowing it to build the much larger post-war merchant ships including one of 333,000 tonnes. However continuing problems led to the company's nationalisation as part of British Shipbuilders in 1977.

The company was bought from the British government in 1989 in a management/employee buy-out in partnership with the Norwegian shipping magnate Fred Olsen. By this time, the number of people employed by the company had fallen to around 3000. For the next few years, Harland and Wolff specialised in building standard oil tankers.

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## **RESTRUCTURING**

Faced with competitive pressures (especially as regards shipbuilding), Harland and Wolff sought to shift and broaden their portfolio, focusing less on shipbuilding and more on design and structural engineering, as well as ship repair, offshore construction projects and competing for other projects to do with metal engineering and construction. This led to Harland and Wolff constructing a series of bridges in Britain including from memory the M3 over the Lagan.

Whilst Harland & Wolff has no involvement in any shipbuilding projects for the foreseeable future, the company is increasingly involved in overhaul, re-fitting and ship repair, as well as the construction and repair of off-shore equipment such as oil platforms. In late 2007, the 'Goliath' gantry crane was re-commissioned, having been moth-balled in 2003 due to the lack of heavy-lifting work at the yard.

Belfast's skyline is still dominated today by Harland and Wolff's famous twin cranes, Samson and Goliath, built in 1974 and 1969 respectively. They seem to follow you around Belfast. For those of you who don't know me I do tours around loyalist murals in Belfast and in those tours we travel the four corners of this great city and tourists repeatedly make the comment "the cranes are never far away."

Now we'll take a few moments to reflect on HMS Belfast;

In 1936, the Admiralty decided to order two enlarged and improved versions of the large light cruisers of the 'Southampton' class. In keeping with the policy of naming the 'Southampton's after British cities, it was decided to call the two ships 'Edinburgh' and 'Belfast'.

HMS Belfast was built in east Belfast, the keel was laid in December 1936 and she was launched by Mrs Neville Chamberlain amid fantastic splendour on St Patricks day in 1938. After a series of sea tests HMS Belfast was commissioned into the Royal Navy in August 1939.

For those of you who love statistics HMS Belfast;

1. The Standard displacement was 11,553 tons.
  2. The overall length: 613 feet 6 inches (187metres)
  3. Her beam was 69 feet (21metres)
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4. The guns on board were: 12 x 6-inch guns, eight 4-inch guns, twelve Bofors
5. The maximum speed was 32 knots (36 miles per hour)
6. The number of naval crew was between 750 – 850

On the outbreak of war with Germany in September 1939, HMS Belfast formed part of the 18th Cruiser Squadron operating out the Home Fleet's main base at Scapa Flow in Orkney.

Over the course of the next few weeks the ship was constantly on patrol in Northern waters, as part of the Navy's efforts to impose a maritime blockade on Germany.

On 9 October, HMS Belfast successfully intercepted the German liner SS Cap Norte which was trying to return to Germany disguised as a neutral vessel. The liner was boarded and sent under armed guard to a British port. Cap Norte was the largest enemy merchant ship intercepted to date and under Admiralty law Belfast's crew received 'prize money' in the form of a cash gratuity for her capture.

The Germans exacted a swift revenge for HMS Belfast's early success in capturing the Cap Norte when, shortly before 11.00 am on 21 November 1939, whilst leaving the Firth of Forth, HMS Belfast was rocked by the detonation of a magnetic mine.

Luckily enough casualties were light, but the ship's back was broken and the damage to her hull and machinery caused by the whiplash effect of the explosion was so severe that almost three years were to elapse before she could be made fit for action.

When Belfast finally rejoined the Home Fleet in November 1942, the Cruiser was the largest and arguably the most powerful ship in the Royal Navy. Not only had she been 'bulged' amidships, increasing her standard displacement to 11,500 tons and significantly improving her stability, but she had also been equipped with the most up-to-date radar and fire control systems. As a result, she was soon in the forefront of Britain's naval war in the Atlantic; as flagship of the Tenth Cruiser Squadron, responsible for providing close range heavy cover for the Arctic convoys taking supplies to the Soviet Union.

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1943 saw Belfast escorting the Atlantic convoys from Russia to America. Between August 1941 and the end of the war, a total of 75 convoys made the perilous journey to and from north Russia, carrying four million tons of supplies, including 5,000 tanks and 7,000 aircraft for use by Soviet forces fighting against the German Army on the Eastern Front. The merchant seamen showed true heroism during their long sea passages in convoys, during which half or more of the ships could be sunk before safety was reached.

Between the beginning of November and the middle of December 1943, no less than three eastbound and two westbound Arctic convoys reached their destinations without loss and the Commander-in-Chief of the German Navy, Grand Admiral Doenitz, came under increasing pressure to sanction a sortie by one of Germany's few remaining heavy surface ships to interrupt the flow of supplies via the Arctic convoy route.

On Christmas Day, the battle cruiser Scharnhorst, her mess decks adorned with traditional Christmas decorations, set sail from Langefjord with five destroyers. Her mission: to attack and destroy two convoys as they passed the northern tip of Norway.

Unknown to the Germans, British Intelligence was intercepting and deciphering German signals and within hours the Admiralty had informed the Commander-in-Chief Home Fleet, Admiral Fraser, that Scharnhorst was at sea, giving him plenty of time to dispose his forces. While Rear-Admiral Burnett in HMS Belfast, with the cruisers Norfolk and Sheffield, screened the convoys and kept Scharnhorst in play, Admiral Fraser, in the battleship HMS Duke of York, accompanied by the large light cruiser HMS Jamaica and four destroyers, would cut her off from the south.

Early on the morning of Boxing Day, 26 December, the Scharnhorst having lost contact with her destroyers, encountered Burnett and his cruisers only to be driven off after being hit by one of HMS Norfolk's 8-inch shells. After a further unsuccessful attempt to break through the convoys, the Scharnhorst retreated at high speed with Belfast and Sheffield in hot pursuit, driving the enemy towards Admiral Fraser and the 14-inch guns of HMS Duke of York. Shortly after gaining radar contact, the Duke of York succeeded in hitting the German battle cruiser with her first salvo.

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Although Scharnhorst twisted and turned, she was unable to shake off her tormentors and eventually her fire slackened sufficiently to allow Admiral Fraser to send in his destroyers. Hit by at least three torpedoes and pounded by heavy artillery at point blank range, the battle cruiser was now dead in the water. Finally, the Belfast and Jamaica were ordered to sink her with torpedoes. Even as HMS Belfast fired, Scharnhorst's radar blip vanished, to be followed by a series of muffled underwater explosions as she slipped beneath the waves. Only thirty-six of her complement of 1,963 men survived.

In March 1944, HMS Belfast sailed from Scapa Flow in company with a powerful force of battleships and aircraft carriers. Their objective was the battleship Tirpitz, Germany's last surviving heavy surface unit, moored in the supposedly impregnable anchorage of Altenfjord in northern Norway.

In the early hours of 3 April, having approached to within 120 miles of the Norwegian coast, the carriers launched 42 bombers and 80 fighters in the largest air strike yet undertaken by the Fleet Air Arm. Tirpitz was hit by 15 bombs and although not sunk, was incapable of putting to sea for several months.

During the D Day landings HMS Belfast was part of the Eastern Naval Task Force, with responsibility for supporting the British and Canadian assaults on 'Gold' and 'Juno' beaches and, at 5.30 am on 6 June 1944, was one of the very first ships to open fire on German positions in Normandy.

Over the course of the next five weeks she was almost continuously in action, firing thousands of rounds from her main 6-inch and secondary 4-inch batteries in support of Allied troops fighting their way inland against skilful and determined German opposition. Later, the battle lines having moved beyond the range of her 6-inch guns, HMS Belfast set sail for Plymouth Devonport and a well-earned refit, prior to being despatched to the Far East. She had fired her guns in anger for the last time in European waters.

When HMS Belfast arrived in the Far East the war was coming to an end many of the emaciated survivors of Japanese prisoner of war camps were evacuated to HMS Belfast and given urgent treatment on board.

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Following her first peacetime refit, HMS Belfast returned to the Far East in December 1948 as flagship of the Fifth Cruiser Squadron.

Korea was to be the next theatre of war for Belfast. At the end of the Second World War, the ancient kingdom of Korea was split between a hard-line Communist regime in the north and a western-style government, supported by the United States, in the south. On 25 June 1950, the North Korean People's Army invaded South Korea.

The United Nations Security Council voted to give aid to the South and, after halting the North Koreans around the port of Pusan, UN forces landed behind enemy lines at Inchon and quickly overran most of the country.

In October 1950, however, Communist China entered the war and thousands of 'People's Volunteers' - six full armies - crossed into North Korea.

UN troops were forced to retreat and by the summer of 1951, both sides had settled down to a lengthy war of attrition along the line of the 38th Parallel. After two years of negotiations, the Korean War came to an end on 17 July 1953.

HMS Belfast was amongst the very first British ships to go into action off Korea, bombarding in support of retreating South Korean and American troops only eleven days after the North Korean invasion.

Her service in the Korean War, during which she spent no less than 404 days on active patrol, was as long and arduous as that with the Home Fleet during the Second World War.

On 27 September 1952, she sailed for home, having fired her guns in anger for the last time.

During the years 1959-62 HMS Belfast was back in the Far East performing the usual duties of HM ships abroad in peacetime - carrying out exercises and generally "showing the flag".

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HMS Belfast returned to the UK and made a final visit to the City of Belfast. Following one last exercise in the Mediterranean, she finally paid off in Devonport on 24 August 1963 and her Admiral's flag was hauled down for the last time. She had earned her rest, having steamed nearly half a million miles during her operational life.

In the normal course of events, her next destination would very probably have been the scrapyard. However, behind the scenes, a determined group of men led by her former captain, now Rear Admiral, Sir Morgan Morgan-Giles DSO OBE GM, decided to save her. As a result HMS *Belfast* is the largest surviving example of Britain's twentieth century naval power and is now a museum moored on the Thames between Tower and London Bridge. She was the first ship to be saved for the nation since Nelson's HMS *Victory* due to her historical importance.

The HMS *Belfast* experience provides living testament to her illustrious service, her battle stories and the conditions in which up to 950 crew members lived and fought in until her retirement from the Royal Navy in 1965.

Over 6 million people have visited her since she became an Imperial War Museum site in 1978.

As someone who has visited her twice I would recommend that when you are in London you pay our namesake a visit.

Thanks

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